

## *Terre et Mer*

*By Nico Earhart*

**I am a surfer** by birthright but a golfer by choice. I have scoured the globe in search of unmapped waves and undiscovered golf courses. I've seen the forlorn look of longing as that last corner of a dusty road was rounded, exposing a tranquil sea and listless waves rolling into an empty beach. All that work for nothing. Hours and days wasted in transit to reach a spot expecting great surf only to find lake-like flatness. No waves. But I have also seen eyes light up as reeling lines pour into a vacant bay. Where the time and effort has paid off to reveal an unknown roller spinning down the point. Revealing only to those in that secret group the potential that lay in wait for them in that remote locality. And as I grew older and settled into the game of golf with some familiarity I have seen that same euphoric look again; I've seen it plastered on the visages of men as they drove up a nameless road that ran to a rouge golf course whose potential is just as fruitful as that secret point break. Courses unpublished and strange. Where I did not know what to expect until I got there and when I did was so glad to have made the trip that I could hardly wait to jump from the car. Couldn't wait to run past the clubhouse and peek out onto that rolling grassland where I had just made a secret discovery of my own. So when I made my way to Morocco with the intention of finding waves, dead-set on strapping on my wetsuit each morning and heading into the sea, golf was not what I expected. But what finally gave me that dazed look of potential discovery was not nestled at the shore's edge, but at a golf course set atop a remote hillside in a mysterious corner of West Africa.

Like many surfers have done before me on a cold winter's night, I sat down to my computer a few months before I left to scour that vast stretch of African coastline, aided by satellite imagery. I dragged my mouse about the rocky shore looking for those telltale strips of whitewater rolling into the beach – A sign of potential surf where the satellite's eye had wandered. There were outcroppings dotted with tiny craft anchored near the shore. Clusters of houses where I knew good waves had already been saturated at my destination, Anchor Point, on the Southwestern coast of Morocco. But then, something else caught my eye. Away from the water's edge and perched on a hill. Ashy-green globules appeared, drawn out of the unpainted desert. A golf course by my judgment. Fairways, greens and bunkers sewn into the pallid hillside near the cavernous shape of a hotel complex. I zoomed in closer, admiring the flow and routing of this phantom track. I was able to pinpoint the location of the course, five kilometers from where we would be staying and armed with the address and a phone number was determined to scour it once I finally arrived.

Two months later I touched down in Marrakesh via a 12-hour flight to Madrid, an 8-hour layover and a 2-hour flight to the city. My first impression was one of basically semi-controlled chaos. No traffic laws. Cars and an abundance of scooters buzzing about unimpeded by pesky driving laws. No street markers to be seen. It's possible that the streets did have names but I was unimpressed by the signage. Everything in Marrakesh is centered around and reverberates out from the Medina, the old part of the city. Driving in our newly acquired hired truck, we would have to cross from one side of the Medina to the other to get to our destination. Madness ensued in the narrow streets as we tried to find a rental house with no functioning address and

were forced to conscript help from a passing motorist. He took a quick break from yelling at us with the rest of the crowd to look at a sheet of paper containing the location of our rental. Eventually, we arrived at our destination, minus one hundred dirhams demanded as we reached the gates of the complex. Morocco is a country lubricated by *baksheesh* (bribe) and locals know that, for the most part, they've got you by the short ones. But the joke was on him. I would have gladly paid a thousand dollars to get off those chaotic streets.



Street Art in Marrakech, MOR

After settling in and washing off the film of thirty straight hours of travel, we decided to tour the Medina and see some sights before we headed to the coast early the next morning. It is a labyrinth of covered walk-ways, narrow side streets and dark, ominous passageways. This is the main draw for tourism here so we were joined by hordes of European holidaymakers scouring the stalls for cheap gewgaws. Blocks of three and four-story apartments, minarets poking out of the skyline like spurs, all sharing connected walls. We wandered the streets in the half-

light of sunset, not looking to buy anything, raising the ire of the spice merchants and curio-hawkers. Young men enticed us with private tours of the Medina, informing us (untruthfully) that portions were cordoned off to Westerners but we took no heed of their advisories. Sets of portly Germans exiting from the alleyways that had just been declared 'forbidden.' Another trick of the Moroccan trade. Most of these tight passageways opened back up to other luminous plazas crammed with cafés and hookah lounges where bearded men casually pulled at stained-glass chalices. We ate at a restaurant overlooking a great courtyard as the sun dipped below the Atlas Mountains. Packs of tourists roamed through the yellow glaze of floodlights below us and we left the Medina knowing we had many miles of unknown Moroccan highway ahead of us.

From Marrakech we drove three-and-a-half hours southwest, splitting the lower foothills of the Atlas and then dipping into the Sidi Valley, headed to the port city of Agadir. The rugged mountains provided a Georgia O'Keeffe backdrop to the harsh desert that occupies the majority of the country. Passing through the outskirts of Agadir we had an encounter with Moroccan National Police, who flagged us down shortly after going through a toll booth. The officer produced for me an indecipherable text message written in Arabic with sets of numbers and letters. A message from his partner who had supposedly clocked my speed a few kilometers back, although I found it coincidental that he stood behind my car and looked at my license plate before he showed me the text. But there isn't much you can do in a country where you neither speak the language, know the laws nor look like one of its inhabitants. We paid out the *baksheesh*, about fifteen dollars and were soon on our way into the periphery of Agadir. In years to come Agadir might be a lovely place. With burgeoning waterfront

hotels and portside apartment buildings. But for now it has a rough and tumble edge to it like many towns built around a harbor and it didn't agree with me. So we pressed on driving, another half hour up the coast to the fishing village of Tazegzout. Home to a collection of amazing surf breaks and that phantom golf course and where we would be stationed for the next two weeks.

What was once an obscure fishing village on an unknown coast is now jammed with hotels, surf shops, restaurants, cafés and a steady supply of incoming tourists. Surfers started showing up here in the late 60s and early 70s looking for undiscovered waves and like so many once-anonymous coastal towns, word got out and the town began to grow. Tazegzout, now looking more like a dystopian vision of Huntington Beach, has access to a dozen surf breaks with names like Boilers, the Well, Hash Point, Devil's Rock and the penultimate break at Anchor Point. After three hours of driving and an unnerving encounter with the constabulary we were ready to locate the rental and be done with the road, but first, we had the predicament of finding it. In continuing directional woes, the address we had been given was listed simply as 'N-r' meaning it was located somewhere on National Highway One, an artery running over 2,000 kilometers from Dakhla, in Western Sahara, to Tangier in northern Morocco; so it was somewhere along that vast stretch of highway, we just had to find out where. Eventually, after stopping for lunch and connecting to the internet we contacted the owner and were able to hone in on its location.

We had made it safely from Marrakesh but it seemed that Morocco still had another surprise in store for us. For the next four days, as the waves outside our door peeled perfectly from the point, my partner and I were mired in a haze of food-borne illness, including digestive pyrotechnics and general malaise. Getting

up off the couch entailed a herculean effort which meant that surfing and golfing were not in the cards either. I pounded water continuously and ate what little I could force down my gullet attempting to return to my happy-healthy-self, but it was a miserable experience that wised us up to safe food preparation and inclined me to become a pescatarian for the remainder of the trip. I shed about ten pounds but the road to get there I could have done without.



*The hill behind the course at Tazegzout Bay*

On the fifth morning, I rose with no suspect feeling from my intestines and although a bit drained I knew the storm had passed. My first instinct was to surf but along with the passing of the peptic storm, another storm had passed, the one providing the waves. They were dead flat as soon as I felt better, which seems like the common case on surf trips. With only one option available to me my eyes began to train on that southern hill. I had seen a few of the holes from the road as we drove into town, so I knew where it was located. Just had to go up there. The following afternoon I ditched my sandals and threw on some presentable golfing attire. I drove back through the main, dusty drag of

Tazegzout. Past packs of surfers. To that palatial white hotel we had driven past a few days earlier and the clubhouse at the property's southern end. It was quiet a couple hours after noon. Only a few other cars in the lot so I stomped into the Pro Shop to inquire within. Tazegzout Bay Golf Club, a 7,200-yard brute designed by Kyle Phillips and opened in 2014, appeared before me like a mirage. Made even more dream-like by the near-total absence of other golfers. There were a number of French retirees making their way to the back nine but other than that the place was empty.



*The linksy set up at Tazegzout Bay Golf Course*

Tazegzout Bay was built inside of the basin of a great white wash that towers over the course like a sentry. Waste areas of ashen-yellow sand and scrubby Argan trees holding firm in bunches against the omnipresent Atlantic wind follow the wash all the way to sea level. The designers took the land into consideration rather than bulldozing large spreads to make the course flat and easy. The holes have been folded into the fabric of the earth, bending and rising with the natural slope and curvature of the mountain. The bone-colored humus rings in pale green fairways

and bunkers that match the hue of the land. In constructing the course, the designers took an environmentally sustainable approach, routing the holes around established groups of trees rather than cutting them and using recycled water. This approach was supported by the course's pure, uniform playing surface and immaculate greens that rolled as true as a Scottish Links. Attention to detail. And the course doesn't lose anything with their adherence to sustaining the local environment, a tough task to accomplish in the African desert. Add to this the remarkable views available throughout and I knew I had stumbled onto something special.

They say the hallmark of a truly great golf course is that each hole is uniquely memorable and if that is the case, Tazegzout Bay did exceedingly well. From the first hole, a tricky uphill Par 5 with anxiety-inducing bunkers left and right, the layout winds towards that ever-present wash at the top of the course, until it reaches its highest point on the 3<sup>rd</sup> tee box. Even from this elevated recess away from the sea, the views are still golden. Occasionally, a big rig passes along the highway behind the course but this is a peaceful perch that affords views up and down the sparse Moroccan coastline. The 4<sup>th</sup> is a long, downhill Par 4 with a dry creek bed on the left side ending in a green at the geographic center of the course. From here it's routed back up the hill, this time on the southern side of the wash with the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> holes leading nearly back up to that scenic overlook. To get back to the clubhouse and round out the front nine, the last three holes, Par 4 7<sup>th</sup>, Par 3 8<sup>th</sup>, and Par 5 9<sup>th</sup> follow the sloping terrain, through scrub bushes, wind-bent stands of Argan trees and powdery white silt. The 9<sup>th</sup> is a stretched-out, downhill Par 5 and a drive hit straight and solidly will give golfers a great shot at getting onto the putting surface in two.

The front nine, set into the rear portion of the property, is majestic enough but it's the back where the designers were really able to let their talents shine. The inward half occupies a cliffside portion of the parcel set about eighty feet above sea level. The 10<sup>th</sup> drops down into a narrow river valley, the approach shot over a steep draw. To get back up the hill for the last time, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, two Par 4s, lead up an incline past the clubhouse before reaching the tee box on the 13<sup>th</sup>. From here on, the holes are all pressed up against that cliff face in front of the hotel. Most of the greens are perched right on the edge and provide an even better view of the seascape. Numbers 14 and 15 are wedged into a thin offshoot canyon crossing its own creek and providing a little stress for the approach as each one will cross a hazard area and narrow creek. But it's the last three holes that really add that finishing touch to this course.



*Par 4 16<sup>th</sup> surrounded by cliffside*

The 16<sup>th</sup> hole overlooks a deep chasm that can gobble up a well-hit drive, so it's important to make sure and hold the wide fairway for the next downhill shot over a steep canyon. This brings us to the trademark hole of Tazegzout Bay, the Par 3 17<sup>th</sup> – a 150-yard beast directly into the

prevailing winds and over an abyssal ravine to the smallest green on the course. It also happens to be guarded by four deep, hollow bunkers front and back. It might not look like much on the scorecard but when you're standing on the box trying to make an adjustment as another gust churns up, it can be a miracle just to hold the putting surface. The green is flat and easy to read but managing to get a ball to come to rest there is a whole different story. Wind up in one of the greenside traps and your next shot will be to an area at least ten feet above your head. Even though in the three rounds I played, I was never able to hit the green, this hole will stand out as one of the best Par 3s I have ever played, worldwide. The finisher, a Par 5 that runs parallel to the cliff from the tee to a green set on the edge of the precipice, is a memorable hole but after just wrapping up one of the best golf holes I've ever played, I found myself dwelling on the 17<sup>th</sup> as I walked back up to the restaurant.

After stumbling upon this hidden track my life was made that much easier on the trip. There would be no more sorrowful look of longing when I woke and discovered that the waves had gone flat again. If that was the case, I'd just throw on my golf ensemble and head up the hill to see if I could get on, which was never a problem. I even found that when the waves were good, the upsurge in action attracting surfers into the lineup (fifty plus by my count on a few occasions) I would drive back up the hill, the corduroy lines in my rearview running to the horizon, to escape to that unpopulated golf course. Nobody up on the hill would vibe me as I made my way to the first tee. None of the employees cared if I played a hole two or three times in a row. Up there I had more freedom than any of those cold surfers braving the mongrel hoards at Anchor Point. But something tells me that Tazegzout Bay Golf Course can't remain a secret for very long. When I visited, two

monstrous hotels were under construction, along with scores of private condos and apartments just down the road. Like other corners of the globe where waves break, it is the pioneering surfers who move in first to explore and before long the speculators and developers slide in to get their slice of the pie.



*Par 3 17<sup>th</sup> Signature hole of Tazegzout Bay Golf Club*

Our time at the point slowly slipped away but I was able to make it to the course a number of times over the span of two weeks. The waves came and went. I surfed enough to have made it a successful wave hunt but the greatest accomplishment of my time in Morocco was not mounting those gliding sheets of sea water but finding the course at Tazegzout Bay Resort. That secret course I was able to pin down, assisted by technology, is what will stick out in my mind for years to come. Not sitting in a cold and crowded line up waiting for Anchor Point to do its thing. Granted, when it was doing its thing it is a wonder to behold, but so was that phantom course perched on the hill like a dream. We cut out from Tazegzout early on a Friday morning, anxious to get that nerve-racking drive over with and nestle ourselves anonymously back into

Marrakesh. I was able to play golf one more time before I left, at Noria Golf Club, a great looking track with a lot of potential that still needs a few more years to mature. But of the memories I'll bring home with me, from ruddy sunsets on the porch to days spent nauseously glued to the couch to those right-hand peelers, it's the secret links course I found that holds on the longest and what will probably get me headed back to SW Morocco in no time.